

The Role of Motivation and Demotivation in Japanese EFL Learning

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Abstract

This article discusses the influence of motivation and demotivation on English language acquisition, and aims to not only identify the most prevalent motivators/demotivators in the Japanese EFL education system but also measure the strength of their impact. This is done in two steps. First, research studies done on Japanese EFL student motivation/demotivation are analyzed. Second, the findings of these research studies are referenced in a survey done at a public high school in Japan to measure the impact of the most commonly mentioned motivators and demotivators. The survey took data from a group of fifty-six students, who were asked what factors most motivated or discouraged their study of English. They also rated how strongly each factor affected them. An interview with the students' teacher was also conducted for further insights. Students' awareness of the practical value of English was the strongest motivation factor.

Keywords

motivation, demotivation, EFL learning, classroom dynamics, international community

Introduction

It has long been established that motivation plays a significant role in language acquisition. This article analyzes the ways in which Japanese EFL students are motivated or demotivated and further explores the impact these factors have. Data was gathered from both prior research

studies and the author's study at a Japanese public high school. The primary questions being analyzed are: What positive motivators factor into the Japanese EFL classroom and to what degree? What demotivators are there and to what extent do they affect language acquisition?

Background into motivation and demotivation influences

Team teaching and classroom dynamics

One factor that seems to play a positive role in motivating students is team teaching. Japanese teachers work with a native English speaker and they teach the class as a team. This allows the teachers to combine their strengths with those of their counterparts to provide more effective learning experiences. A study by Carless (2006) reveals some of the positive effects of team teaching on second language English learners as well as how team teaching may best be used to create a positive learning environment. Participants were teachers in government-orchestrated team teaching programs in Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong. Positive effects of team teaching were found to come most often from an increased exposure to foreign culture, native-speakers' English pronunciation, and oral communication between team teachers. By understanding what aspects of team teaching are most influential, teachers participating in similar programs can accentuate the most positive aspects of their lessons.

Of course, motivation in the classroom comes not only from teachers but also from classroom dynamics. According to Negishi (2010), students working in groups have higher motivation to participate if they have support from their peers. Negishi investigated the dynamics of group oral interaction as well as the relationship between language development and interactional management functions. Participants in the study consisted of 135 Japanese students. Working in groups of three, each group chose a conversation topic and was observed for five

minutes (after a half-minute self-introduction from each member). Audio and video data were recorded, reviewed, and analyzed. Results showed that less proficient students tended to rely on questions posed by other students and that their speaking was other-nominated rather than self-nominated. By knowing which aspects of oral communication students try to avoid and which are more likely to induce responses/participation from students, teachers can better structure oral activities to provide students with more motivation to participate.

EFL learning in Japan, however, often does not take place in groups. More often, it involves students working independently. One of the key elements in independent study is reading. Some researchers believe that if students enjoy reading in their L1, that motivation will transfer over to reading in the L2 they are studying. Takase (2007) did a study on the sources of reading motivation and whether there are connections between L1 and L2 reading motivation. High school students in Japan participated in a reading program for one academic year, and factors were analyzed based on the materials they used, L2 reading ability, attitude towards L2 reading, sociocultural environment, and random interviews within the sample. It was determined that Japanese students who were motivated to read in their L1 did not transfer that motivation to L2 reading, mainly because of their lack of proficiency in English. Students who did have intrinsic motivation to read English were, in contrast, not motivated to read in their L1. It was concluded that motivation to read in an L2 had no connection with L1 reading motivation. Rather, L2 reading motivation came more from students' intrinsic motivation to learn English.

Thus, to summarize, motivation to learn in the classroom can come in many forms. It may result from exposure to team teaching, which provides a more complete EFL experience while maintaining the sense of security from having a native L1-speaking teacher. It can also come from peer support, which stimulates participation. In addition, knowing what factors do

not have an impact, such as the lack of a connection between L1 and L2 reading motivation, can help us better understand how to use our time with students. Of course, some aspects of English motivation, such as foreign culture, are difficult to bring into Japanese classrooms. For this we look to another topic in the study of English language study motivation: being in a foreign community and studying abroad.

Study abroad and the “imagined international community”

Study abroad is a common way for students to experience firsthand the culture of the L2 they are studying. The question is what impact it has on motivation. Miyuki (2011) analyzed the effects of overseas experience on Japanese students’ English writing ability and motivation over the course of 3.5 years. Thirty-seven Japanese students were carefully observed, 28 of them studying abroad in English-speaking countries and nine studying in Japan. It was determined that students who studied abroad significantly improved their writing proficiency more than those that stayed in Japan. In addition, it was noted that students who studied abroad for more than four months improved more than the others and that students who spent over eight months abroad became intrinsically motivated to improve their writing on a voluntary basis. Another study by Sasaki (2007) concludes that study abroad not only increases motivation to write but also increases intrinsic motivation to learn English in general. This motivation is present during the actual stay abroad and continues even after students return to Japan.

For some students, however, study abroad may not be an option. Programs can often be expensive and require considerable time. However, a study done by Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide (2008) found that there are ways in which aspects of the study abroad experience can be imported into a domestic classroom by creating what they refer to as an “imagined international

community.” An imagined international community can be established by bringing real-life contexts into the classroom and simulating practical English use situations that the students would normally have no exposure to in the traditional classroom setting. One example of this is Japanese students interacting with pen pals in foreign countries. Although the students are not actually abroad, they can still communicate in an authentic context, imagining their pen pals’ experiences in another country through the correspondence they receive. The results showed that although study abroad students had the largest advantage over the other groups, several members of a stay-at-home imagined international community education program developed similarities to the study abroad members. Although not as substantial as the long-term study abroad members, the imagined international community group also showed a significant increase in both writing ability and motivation. In other words, the effects of an imagined international community can be similar to study abroad experience. Fushino (2010) also supports the idea of simulating a foreign community through group work. Data collected from a questionnaire given to 729 Japanese students confirmed that their willingness to communicate as participants in a community was much higher than in the typical lecture-style class environment commonly found in Japan. By recognizing that Japanese students are more motivated and willing to participate in groups and seeing how positive aspects of study abroad can be adopted in domestic education, teachers can help students who are unable to study abroad.

Demotivators

Traditional methods of motivation, in combination with experience in a study abroad program or an imagined international community, can have a very positive effect on student motivation in EFL learning. Despite all of these positive motivators, many students do not seem to be

motivated in their EFL studies. The underlying reason may be the presence of factors in their education that have a negative influence: demotivators.

Demotivators are aspects of students' educational experience that hinder their progress and decrease their motivation to learn. Sakai & Kikuchi (2009) attempted to find out not only what demotivating factors are present in Japanese high schools but also which factors are most influential. A questionnaire was given to 656 Japanese high school students and reviewed. Five potential demotivators were analyzed: learning content/ materials, teacher competence and style, inadequate school facilities, lack of motivation, and test scores. It was determined that the two strongest demotivators were learning content/materials and test scores. Hamada (2011) analyzed how these demotivators among high school students compared with those present in junior high school, exploring how demotivation evolves as a student's education progresses. It was determined that junior high school students' strongest demotivators were tests, loss of self-confidence, and the nature of English (compared to Japanese) as a language. In contrast, high school students' strongest demotivators were loss of self-confidence, textbooks, and lesson style.

Although many of these demotivators are difficult to control, one aspect that can be addressed is whether or not the students L1 should be used in the classroom. This has been a heavily debated topic among linguists and EFL teachers. While many believe that using the students' L1 can alleviate anxiety and boost confidence, others feel that an L2 only environment provides a more authentic and engaging experience with the English language. Schools in Japan subscribe to a variety of different ideas and policies. McMillan & Rivers (2011) surveyed 29 native English speakers at a Japanese university where English is used exclusively in language classes and is promoted as providing the best learning environment for the students. Contrary to the university policy, the majority of those teachers felt that the use of Japanese in class could

enhance students' L2 learning. The conclusion was drawn that teachers and students are best equipped to make the decision based on the needs of their own teaching/learning environment and that what works for some may not work for others. With so many different opinions on the subject, it is important for teachers to question "one size fits all" policies that may affect their students' needs in a learning environment.

After identifying our students' strongest demotivators, we can address these problems by doing two things. First, we can create lessons that minimize the impact of demotivators on students. Second, we can reinforce positive motivators, such as engaging material and real contexts for using English.

Research study methodology

To further explore how motivators and demotivators influence EFL learning in Japanese schools, I conducted a study at a Japanese public high school. The goal of the study was not only to confirm the presence of the motivators and demotivators in the aforementioned studies but also to measure the impact they had on students' motivation to study English. Data was gathered in two parts. First, survey data was taken from a group of 56 Japanese public high school students who were selected randomly from sixteen different English classes. In the second part of the study, a long-term English teacher at the school who is native to Japan was interviewed to determine what factors he felt motivated or demotivated English language students. This was done to establish whether or not teacher opinions on students' motivation problems corresponded with the survey results, as well as to gain insight into how teachers may be addressing motivational issues they detect in their classes.

In an effort to obtain valid data, student responses were taken anonymously so that students

could answer honestly. The survey was also given with a bilingual teacher present to translate and explain the meaning of the survey items in order to minimize any misunderstandings. Rather than providing the students options to choose from, they were asked to give their own opinions of what factor motivates them the most to study English. In addition, they were also asked to rate how strongly that one factor they each chose motivates them to study English, (1 = not very motivated and 10 = extremely motivated). They were also asked what discourages them from studying English the most and how strongly that factor discourages them (1 = not very discouraging and 10 = extremely discouraging). Due to the size of the sample group, in order to minimize anomalies, only the top three most commonly occurring answers for each section were used for analysis. The following is the data collected:

Study results and discussion

Student survey

Table 1

Most Frequently Occurring Motivators and Rating Frequency

| Motivation | Motivation frequency | Motivation rating frequency | | | | | | | | | | Average rating |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----------------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| English academic requirement | 21 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4.3 |
| English study is fun | 18 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5.1 |
| English use with foreigners/travel | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6.7 |

Table 2

Most Frequently Occurring Demotivators and Rating Frequency

| Demotivation | Demotivation frequency | Demotivation rating frequency | | | | | | | | | | Average rating |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----------------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| English is difficult | 18 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6.6 |
| English is not useful in Japan | 14 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6.2 |
| English use with foreigners/travel | 11 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 5.8 |

The data shows that the most frequently mentioned source of motivation was completion of English courses as an academic requirement. The second most common answer was that English class is fun. The desire to use English to speak to foreigners/travel internationally was the third most common answer.

The interesting trend in the data, however, is how strongly the students were motivated for each answer. Although English study to meet an academic requirement was the most common answer, it also had the lowest rating of the top three answers, averaging only 4.3. The motivator of English class being fun had an average rating of 5.1. Students who were motivated to speak to foreigners/travel internationally had a substantially higher average of 6.7.

From this data it can be concluded that if students want to learn English in order to actually implement it in real-life practical situations, they will be more motivated to acquire it.

This may be part of the reason that while almost all Japanese students study English in high school and pass their courses, as adults a large majority cannot speak English. A conclusion can also be drawn that some students' motivation to acquire English is perhaps not to use the language, but rather to meet a requirement that will allow them to pursue other fields of interest. Once the requirement has been fulfilled, this motivation will no longer be present.

In the demotivation section of the survey, the three most commonly occurring answers were (from most frequent to least frequent): English is difficult, English is not useful (practical) in Japan, and English is not fun. All three scored a fairly high demotivation rating, with difficulty at 6.6, practicality at 6.2, and English not being fun at 5.8. We can see that demotivators have a large influence on English study and have a stronger effect than motivators. With the exception of "using English with foreigners/travel," the motivators rated significantly lower than even the weakest demotivator.

Native Japanese English instructor interview

The second portion of this study is an interview with Mr. Nozaki, one of the English teachers at the school. He is an experienced teacher who has studied in the United States and has taught in Japanese public schools for over 10 years. He also has experience team-teaching with a native English speaker. I asked Mr. Nozaki for his opinions on dealing with motivation and demotivation in his own English learning experiences as well those of the students from the survey.

What personal life experiences do you feel influenced your decision to continue learning English and become an English teacher?

After Mr. Nozaki graduated from college, he spent a year traveling along the west coast of the United States. It was only then that he gained an appreciation for oral communication in English. Because of this, he feels that he focuses more on oral communication in his lessons than is common in many Japanese high school English classes.

Why do you feel that you didn't appreciate oral communication in English until going to the United States?

Mr. Nozaki replied, "When I was a student, we didn't have any oral communication lessons. Many of the teachers didn't 'speak' English. Learning English was only grammar and writing. When I came back from America, I went to three oral communication schools because I realized how important oral communication is. I want my students to understand that."

Can you give me an example of a way you try to make classes fun and motivate your students?

One of the few regular contacts Japanese high school students have with English is through popular American music. Karaoke is very popular in Japan, and students are often interested in learning English songs to impress their friends. Mr. Nozaki uses this to his advantage by incorporating popular English music into the class as a way of not only teaching English but also promoting the concept of practical English use. He said that days after these lessons, he would often hear his students singing the songs in the school corridor.

Are there factors in class that discourage your students from learning English and demotivate them?

Mr. Nozaki replied that when the work is too difficult some students just give up entirely. Other students are much better at English and get bored if the work is too easy. He thought that this was a challenging situation because at a public school it is difficult to teach classes with such a variety of students.

You mentioned that Japanese high school students may have little direct contact with English speakers. How do you think students can get “real-life” experience with English outside of class?

I felt Mr. Nozaki’s reply to this question was very well put and a great way to close this interview summary. “It is true that there are not many opportunities for students to use English outside class. However, this will change soon. Every year more English speakers move to Japan. Many Japanese companies are starting to use English as their official language. Japan has always been a country that changes slowly, but English is finally becoming more connected with life in Japan. I think that my students will see that English may be a useful tool for them in the future.”

Mr. Nozaki seemed to have difficulty articulating exactly how to make students understand the practical value of English. However, he certainly realized its importance himself through his own experiences when he was younger. He especially emphasized the role of oral communication in motivation, concurring with findings of the study done by Carless (2006). He also mentioned the work being too difficult or too boring, both of which were some students’ top answers in the survey. The question is then how to minimize these demotivators. By reviewing the results of the survey, it can be concluded that to achieve the highest level of motivation, classes must go beyond being fun and easy to understand. It would seem that the crucial point in teaching English is not only to provide students with authentic real-world contexts for the

material but also to instill a sense of value in learning English for practical use in their lives.

While doing activities that show *how* others use English in real life may be valuable, providing ways that students can use English themselves may produce better class results and increased motivation.

Conclusion

The research reviewed provides an overview of aspects of motivation and demotivation that affect Japanese students in their EFL studies. Although this is a complicated topic, each article offers clues to the reasons why students become motivated, both in domestic and foreign environments, as well as how demotivators can hinder their EFL learning development. Not only do the current study's results correspond with conclusions drawn from the prior motivation studies referenced above, but they also address how strongly these factors affect EFL students at the high school level. By understanding how these motivators and demotivators work, EFL teachers can better construct programs that provide learning environments in which students will want to improve their English and participate to the best of their ability. Further study into these issues is necessary, particularly into the problem of demotivation. This is a major part of English teaching that all instructors must address for successful results in the field of EFL education in Japan.

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Appendix A

Student survey used in the Japanese public high school study

PART I. What do you feel motivates you the most to study English? Please respond in English or Japanese.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly are you motivated to study English by your answer above? (1 being not very motivated and 10 being extremely motivated)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

PART II. What do you feel discourages you the most from studying English? Please respond in English or Japanese.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly are you discouraged from studying English by your answer

above? (1 being not very discouraged and 10 being extremely discouraged)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Author Bio

Kevin Clark is an English instructor at Shimamoto High School. He has 7 years of experience teaching English in Japan. Currently he holds both TESOL/TOFL certification as well as a Master of Science in TESOL from Shenandoah University. His other research interests include C.A.L.L. and the use of media creation technology in the classroom.